

*An Intellectual History of Dietrich Bonhoeffer:
His Actions Through Interpretations of the Protestant Bible, Theology,
and Christian Experiences*

An Honors Thesis (HIST 440)

By

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Abstract

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's intellectual history is a compelling and thought provoking wrestling match between convictions and morality. In light of historical pressures in the German churches, and the absence of a practicing Christian family, Bonhoeffer chose to enter into the field of ministry and study the discipline of theology. With increased political pressure on religious freedom from Hitler's Nazi regime, Bonhoeffer helped organize the Confessing Church in an effort to prevent Nazi manipulation of Christian doctrine. Later, Bonhoeffer used his contacts to aid the Valkyrie conspirators in an attempt to assassinate Hitler. In my paper, I analyze the mental transition Bonhoeffer endured to take each of these major steps in his life and how that influenced him to resist Hitler. Bonhoeffer serves as an extraordinary example of the common human dilemma: what do you do when there do not seem to be any good choices? In an effort to not compromise his belief in Biblical principles, yet still make a stand for Germany, Christianity, and persecuted Jews, Bonhoeffer attempted to navigate the challenges he faced with an increased reliance on Scripture, which he understood to be truth.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and dedicate this paper to my late grandfather, Herman "Papaw" Worrell, who served in the US Army, in the Aleutian Islands, during World War II.

I would like to thank Dr. Bruce Geelhoed for being an outstanding professor and guide through the construction of this thesis. His encouragement and mentoring has meant so much to me through this process and enhanced the product of this research.

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I would like to thank my fiancé, Katelyn Warner, for being my rock, loving me, and encouraging me through this process. Thank you for being the best proofreader one can ask for.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Jeff and Carolyn Hill, and fellow Honors College student and Ball State Cardinal, my sister, Grace Hill, for their encouragement to pursue my dream in all things.

Author's Statement

My father is a nondenominational pastor at Connections Christian Church, in Cincinnati, Ohio, and he receives many books as gifts. One that he received a few years ago was the abridged version of Eric Metaxas' new biography on Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which he passed along to me on loan. I have always enjoyed learning about World War II. My grandfather was a veteran of the Pacific Theater, and I enjoyed studying the era because of the war's historical significance. I received the abridged biography over Christmas break in 2014. Little did I know, but I would go on to write a paper on Bonhoeffer the following semester.

In the Spring of 2015, I had the privilege of taking Dr. Kevin Smith's "History of the World War II Era, 1918-1945" class, where I originally wrote a paper on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Originally, I was going to write my honors thesis on Navy SEALs and the history of that military program, but under the advice of Dr. Geelhoed I switched my topic and reworked the paper that I had already completed for Dr. Smith. I have an equal passion for World War II and military history, so the transition was seamless as I began to reevaluate sources and enhance my previous work.

I am grateful that I was able to transform this paper on Dietrich Bonhoeffer because it allowed me to practice constructing a better historical narrative than I had in my original attempt. I believe this work allowed me to use better chronological analysis and gives a clearer insight into the mental strain Bonhoeffer experienced in light of the pressure he faced in Nazi Germany. Overall, I am pleased with my work and am proud of this thesis.

Introduction

Due to the absence of important voices from historical narratives, the story of German citizens in World War II is often unheard. The general perception of Germans during this time is commonly stigmatized due to the incriminating evidence of the Holocaust. As Winston Churchill put it, “It would even be said that the only good German—if one need to use the phrase—was a dead German.”¹ However, there were Germans that participated valiantly in the Second World War and that resisted the Nazi regime in the midst of their rise to power.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of the most important German citizens and theologians in the 20th century.² His story is unique because through his role as a pastor, Bonhoeffer served as a double agent for the British and assisted with the Valkyrie assassination attempt on Hitler’s life. A brilliant theologian, Bonhoeffer had a spiritual awakening and entered the field of theology upon going to college, where he studied during a time of spiritual revival within that discipline. Along the way, Bonhoeffer had to reconcile his Christian beliefs with the political choices that were laid before him during the Interwar period, and ultimately the Second World War. Bonhoeffer’s life of piety and pacifist beliefs, contrasted with his actions against the Third Reich, illustrates the intense mental strain human beings experience when they are faced with no good decisions, making him an admirable and intriguing historical figure.

Following World War I, Germany was torn to pieces by death, loss of infrastructure, and unconditionally had to accept the Treaty of Versailles. A state of

¹ Metaxas, Eric, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr, Spy: A Righteous Gentile vs. The Third Reich*, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010, x-xi.

² Mark A. Kellner, “Why are people still talking about this theologian who plotted to kill Hitler,” *Deseret News* (Web), 9 February, 2016.

crisis is one way to characterize the German churches following the Great War. Thousands of people, especially returning war veterans, were unsatisfied with the theological answers they received from Christians concerning the defeat and condition of Germany following 1919.³ Over seven million casualties had been inflicted on Germany during the First World War, traumatizing the nation as a whole and causing several people to stop practicing their faith.

Formerly, the German churches' doctrine had influences of strict nationalism, which was prominent before and during World War I in German culture. Upon entering the interwar period, the defeated Germans were forced to reconcile their military defeat with the doctrine that had been manipulated by their cultural values. For example, Romans 8:31 is a verse that is commonly used, despite its meaning, to bolster self-confidence in specific causes: "What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?"⁴ Was God against the German people? Similar questions provoked Germans to leave the German churches in resentment and disbelief. To them, an omnipotent, just, German God, whom they had grown to believe in, was no longer a valid God because He allowed Germany to fall from the power they had achieved. As Daniel Borg, a Bible scholar, puts it,

"One can find little warrant for folkish nationalism in the New Testament. Especially in the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus made clear that one's neighbor was not defined by one's ethnicity. Folkish nationalists, however, assumed that love of neighbor meant uniquely love of folk members, and love of folk could therefore mean callous disregard for other peoples. ...Protestant

³ *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*, Directed by Martin Doblmeier, (2000, Alexandria, Va.: Journey Films, 2003) , DVD.

⁴ *The Holy Bible, New International Version Study Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, Romans 8:31.

theologians had come to an appreciation of war coupled with disdain for political liberalism and the [Weimar] Republic.”⁵

The Germans, in the context of World War I, were already constricted to interpreting the Bible and Christian theology through the lens of their political values, despite the contradictions those values had with Scripture itself. This not only led to several Germans leaving the church, but it also prevented Christians from feeling they could be a part of churches.

Following World War I, Bonhoeffer believed that responding with sound, Biblical argument was the key to solving these problems, not violence. If given the chance, Bonhoeffer identified as a pacifist. On April 23rd, 1914, Bonhoeffer’s older brother, Walter, was killed in action by an artillery shell, fighting for Germany, during World War I. Needless to say, the family was devastated. To make matters worse, Walter had left on his deployment on April 21st of the same year, just two days before he was killed. The traumatic experiences that Bonhoeffer and his family endured during the Great War were crucial to Bonhoeffer’s spiritual development. Bonhoeffer carried his beliefs of pacifism with him for the rest of his life.⁶

Early Life

Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up in Berlin in the midst of these struggles, which shaped his perspective on church and corporate worship. Bonhoeffer’s spiritual and intellectual development, therefore, were in large part because of the leadership of his parents. Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer came from very different faith backgrounds, yet they

⁵ Daniel Borg, *The Old-Prussian Church and the Weimar Republic: A Study of Political Adjustment, 1917-1927*, Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984, 179.

⁶ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 11.

agreed to raise their children in a Christian home. It was Paula who led this initiative.⁷ From a pedigree of German aristocracy, Paula Bonhoeffer had several men in her family serve as Lutheran pastors, and it was Paula who taught her children about Jesus in a home-schooling environment.

Karl Bonhoeffer, on the other hand, had a much looser personal connection to Christianity and did not have the same fervor relative to his wife. As Eric Metaxas puts it, “Karl Bonhoeffer would not have called himself a Christian, but he respected his wife’s tutelage of the children in this and lent his tacit approval to it, even if only participating as an observer.”⁸ Karl Bonhoeffer’s perspective on faith not only allowed for Paula to give the students a Christian education, it also shaped the way the family went about practicing their faith.

Despite Paula’s fervor, and Karl’s allowance, the Bonhoeffers did not practice their faith through corporate worship in the church. During this time period, Enlightenment values became a primary focus in German churches, which individualized religious practice. The Bonhoeffers saw their religious practice as an individual preference. Since Karl and Paula did not practice faith to the same extent, they saw church attendance as unnecessary out of respect for Karl’s perspective on faith.⁹

On November 29th, 1920, the Weimar Republic passed legislation that emphasized individual religious freedom: “Both churchmen and Socialists knew that the liberal principles of individual religious freedom, highlighted in the decree of November

⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

⁹ *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*, DVD.

29, undercut church privileges as well as confessional education.”¹⁰ The Bonhoeffers sided with this legislation because it reinforced their beliefs, but it also weakened incentives to participate in German churches.

The problems in the German churches, such as the infiltration of folkish nationalism, also deterred the Bonhoeffers from regular attendance. It was not difficult for the Bonhoeffers to identify the contradictions between a national socialist doctrine and Scripture. However, these contradictions were reason enough to not regularly participate in Berlin churches that were being manipulated by these messages. These nationalist messages compounded into what became known as the *Volkskirche* movement, which were the beginnings of the spread of Nazism into German Protestant churches. The *Volkskirche* movement sponsored a substituting ideology, where a nationalist was needed to stand in the place of Christ. The *Volkskirche* movement also helped provide Germans with political answers they were seeking during the Interwar period. The Bonhoeffers were conservative Germans, but they never were affiliated with the Nazis politically. Thus, the Bonhoeffers only attended church for important occasions such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, and Christian holidays.

These circumstances create an irony and raise an important question: How did Dietrich Bonhoeffer develop his own religious fervor in Christianity, and come to the conclusions he did about corporate worship, without having been raised in a church atmosphere? One answer comes from the quality of education that Paula Bonhoeffer initiated. Daily lessons and religious acts were carried out in the Bonhoeffer family under Paula’s leadership:

¹⁰ Daniel Borg, *The Old-Prussian Church and the Weimar Republic*, 67.

“Paula Bonhoeffer’s faith was most evident in the values that she and her husband taught their children. Exhibiting selflessness, expressing generosity, and helping others were central to the family culture... ‘There was no place for false piety or any kind of bogus religiosity in our home,’ Sabine [Dietrich’s twin sister, said]. ‘Mama expected us to show great resolution.’”¹¹

The strong Christian message that Dietrich learned from a young age helped direct the course of his life. Eric Metaxas points out in his biography, “The concept of cheap grace that Dietrich would later make so famous might have had its origins in his mother; perhaps not the term, but the idea behind it that faith without works is not faith at all, but a simple lack of obedience to God.”¹² The parallels from James 2:17, which Metaxas cites, shows a direct connection between the piety that Dietrich learned from his mother and his theological beliefs.¹³

Another connection stems from when Bonhoeffer vocalized his desires to become a theologian at the age of 13. This makes it more evident that Bonhoeffer was moved to enter ministry from his mother’s teaching and illustrates how his early life affected his decision making once Hitler came to power. The conviction to demonstrate his faith in action and in word lead him to practice ministry. The theological problems in the German churches and his parents’ personal convictions gave them pause when he spoke of his aspirations, but Bonhoeffer persisted into theology, a behavior that characterizes his life.¹⁴

At the age of 18, Dietrich’s faith was galvanized even more. Bonhoeffer studied abroad in the Vatican, attending masses, visiting religious relics, and began his studies in theology. Bonhoeffer was by no means Roman Catholic, yet that did not deter him from

¹¹ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 8.

¹² *Ibid*, 23.

¹³ *The Holy Bible, New International Version Study Bible*, James 2:17.

¹⁴ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 23.

appreciating his experience. In fact, Bonhoeffer appreciated it so much that it changed his perception about corporate worship and awaken a long chain of thought about the purpose and importance of church in Christianity. In a letter to his sister, Dietrich writes:

“If Protestantism had never become an established church the situation would be completely different...[it] would represent an unusual phenomenon of religious life and serious thoughtful piety. It would therefore be the ideal form of religion...[The church] must completely separate herself from the state...It would be long before the people return because they must have something. They would have rediscovered their need for piety. Could this be a solution? Or not?”¹⁵

Dietrich was writing about the political pressures that Protestant church members were succumbing to during the *Volkskirche* movement and clearly identifies that the church must be separated from the state if the integrity of the Christian message is going to be maintained. The letter is one of many artifacts that reveal how Dietrich was contemplating the importance for individual piety and faith in God and how following God needed to be through a church that had the freedom to preach Christian doctrine. The issues surrounding the churches in Germany during the Interwar years continued to mount, which affected Bonhoeffer's perception of National Socialism in an increasingly negative aspect. For now, Dietrich was satisfied by voicing his convictions about churches and Nazism to his family, but his attitudes later became heard in the public square.

As Dietrich grew up and moved into his theological study, the influences from his early life only became more important. From his childhood and teenage years, Bonhoeffer was developing the frame of mind he needed to resist Hitler. The combination of his religious education, the experiences him and his family shared with

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 26.

the German churches, and the consistently reinforced theme of faith in action lead him to enter into the discipline of theology at a time where controversy and revival were simultaneously ongoing. Despite the struggles Germany, its churches, and his parents' feelings, Bonhoeffer became a minister. The conflict driven environment developed a persistence to follow the personal, spiritual calling that Dietrich felt he had on his life.

Theological Influences

Bonhoeffer continued his theological studies in 1928 at the University of Berlin. World War I not only had affected church attendance in Germany, but it also caused the field of theology to reflect and reevaluate many of its arguments. Bonhoeffer's entrance into the field, especially during this time, continued to develop his faith and thoughts about church, the state, and church doctrine under the German political climate. The University of Berlin was the center of this revival of theology, which created a unique opportunity for Bonhoeffer to receive an education.¹⁶

Karl Barth was a forefront theologian in the world at the time of Bonhoeffer's studies. Barth's influence was paramount to Dietrich's intellectual and spiritual development because he was one of the major leaders during the discipline's revival and directed Dietrich to the study and belief in Biblical principles. Barth's major claim as a theologian was:

*"... 'neo-orthodoxy,' which asserted the idea, particularly controversial in German theological circles, that God actually exists, and that all theology and Biblical scholarship must be undergirded by this basic assumption."*¹⁷

In contrast to other antitheist beliefs, Barth's influence was crucial to Bonhoeffer's development as a theologian and a Christian. The two befriended each other while

¹⁶ Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister, DVD.

¹⁷ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 28.

Bonhoeffer was in school, and they continued to correspond well into the Second World War. The continuation of Bonhoeffer's Christocentric education, linked together with the lessons that Paula Bonhoeffer had offered Dietrich, continued to shape his thinking and deepen his convictions for Christianity.

One of Bonhoeffer's foci during his study in Berlin was on the topic of ethics and morality. Barth had published his book, actually called *Ethics*, when Bonhoeffer was first admitted in 1928 to the University. The timing of Barth's *Ethics* and Bonhoeffer's studies played a large part in helping Dietrich formulate, in particular, his own book on ethics and morality. Both Dietrich and Barth discussed the relationship between the church and the state, which increasingly became a more important social issue as the Interwar period drug on. Barth's interpretation of the purpose and role of church in society is very important to understanding Bonhoeffer's:

*"3. The church is the order, sanctified by the actual presence of the Word and Spirit of God, in which, by the grace of God, the message of man's reconciliation with God through Christ is proclaimed, where, by the grace of God, the right answer is given to this by man, i.e., the act of repentance, and where, again by the grace of God, the fellowship of men takes place in this hearing and answering, the only possible and real fellowship."*¹⁸

Such a statement not only reveals the depth of Christian fervor Barth had, but it also shows a small portion of what information was being transmitted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer during his studies in Berlin. The emphasis of church fellowship and its importance in Christianity made it extremely valuable to Bonhoeffer. Any threat to the institution of the church itself, religious freedom in Germany, manipulation of Christian doctrine or Scripture was seen as an important social, and heretical, issue that needed to be prevented and, if possible, fixed.

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *Ethics*, Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, New York: Seabury Press, 1981, 517.

When Nazism emerged in German society, the churches struggled to maintain the integrity of their doctrines in accordance with what Scripture outlines in the Bible. For Bonhoeffer, this was a volatile problem that needed to be resisted. Having already witnessed and heard about the *Volkskirche* movement in his early life, the increasing Nazism in the social and political climate only made Bonhoeffer more uneasy. At a fundamental level, Nazism was trying to replace every authority figure with the state and figurehead of Hitler and his leadership.¹⁹ In the context of Christian churches, this means that Jesus, a Jew, was being replaced with a Jesus that fit the role National Socialists wanted him to.²⁰ Ultimately, the dogmas that were created were attempting to justify the Nazi party platform and the executive authority of Hitler.²¹ These emerging cultural problems, and the effects they were having on the German churches, caused Bonhoeffer to become countercultural in Germany for the rest of his life. This created a backlash in his intellectual focus towards Christocentricity to an even greater extent, continuing to build on the past experiences of his youth and undergraduate studies.²²

Across Germany, there were other influencing factors that had developed in theology during the 1930's. For example, Samuel Koehne writes of the experiences of Protestants in the *Baden Württemberg* region of Germany in the climate of National Socialism:

"To understand the theological milieu of these pastors, it is necessary to explain a little of Pietism. Two of the main emphases of Pietist religious practices and belief were (and are) piety and community. In essence, Pietists are those who

¹⁹ Doris L. Bergen, *The Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

²⁰ A.S. Duncan-Jones, *The Crooked Cross*, London, MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1940.

²¹ Arthur C., Cochrane, *The Church's Confession Under Hitler*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976.

²² James W. Woelfel, *Bonhoeffer's Theology: Classical and Revolutionary*, Nashville: Parthenon Press, 1970.

*follow Phillip Spencer's idea of Collegia Pietatis: That groups of Christians, by gathering together and focusing their attentions on Scripture, can lead more truly Christian lives, partly through providing each other with a self-reflective model for living. As such, an idea of "active Christianity is important."*²³

The Pietist traditions helps characterize the frame of mind Bonhoeffer had and was reinforcing during his times of study. In fact, much of Bonhoeffer's theological thinking involved self-reflection and assessment of where one stood with God in order to conform to who Jesus is described as in the Scriptures.²⁴ Conformity to Jesus was in sharp conflict with the political pressure to conform to Nazi party ideals, yet Bonhoeffer continued to pursue a pure faithfulness and devotion to Christian principles as outlined in the Scriptures.

After his studies in Berlin, Bonhoeffer went abroad to study theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. There, Dietrich not only experienced continued spiritual and intellectual growth, but he also witnessed the diversity of corporate worship within Christendom. Upon arriving in America, religious freedom, racial, and ethnic tolerance were forefront issues for Bonhoeffer. Being in Harlem during an intellectual and cultural revival for African Americans broadened Dietrich's perspective about these social issues in Germany and provided an alternative, inclusive way to integrate diverse peoples into a society. While African Americans still were deprived of civil and political rights in, Bonhoeffer was able to see how that affected their community, their churches, and their faith in God on an individual level as well. Bonhoeffer grew to admire the African American culture, the

²³ Samuel Koehne, "Nazi Germans as a Christian State: The 'Protestant Experience' of 1933 in Württemberg," *Central European History*, no. 1, (2013) : 99.

²⁴ Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Translated from the German Nachfolge, London: SCM Press, 1959.

poetry of Langston Hughes, and the styles of worship that black churches in Harlem implemented, even to the point of favoring their choices in music and order of worship.

During his study at Union, the most important intellectual that Bonhoeffer was influenced by was ironically a Frenchman. Jean Lasserre was a pacifist and continued to reinforce Bonhoeffer's pacifist beliefs while he was abroad. One of the most influential of Lasserre's theses was, "Nothing in the Scriptures gives a Christian the right to destroy the body of Christ."²⁵ The reason this statement was so important to Bonhoeffer was that it complicated his decisions and ethical reasoning. From his time in America on, the conflict between his concept of faith in action and his pacifist beliefs would appear to be in direct contradiction with one another. Lasserre's influence on Bonhoeffer, coupled with the Harlem Renaissance, demonstrated to Bonhoeffer that there was a way to fight for civil and political rights using intellect.

In 1932, Bonhoeffer's final year at Union Seminary, he faced what the most difficult decision of his life up to that point. Germany was in the midst of hyperinflation and Depression, and America soon felt the effects. In addition, Hitler was in the political race as chancellor of Germany and highly favored to win the election. Bonhoeffer was tempted to stay in America because of the harsh economic and political conditions in Germany. Because he identified as a pacifist, it may have been appealing to Bonhoeffer to stay in America and avoid the conflict. His family was surviving the Depression in Germany and had the resources they needed to live, and Dietrich had arrangements available to stay in the United States. It was at this moment when Bonhoeffer decided to return to Germany though.

²⁵ *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Pacifist, Nazi Resister*, DVD.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a historical example of how pacifism does not equate to a retreatist attitude. The conflict that had emerged in Germany economically, and the emergence of Hitler with the Nazi party, posed even greater threats to the German Protestant churches. Bonhoeffer did not believe that returning as a zealot was a solution to those problems, but he did believe that he had a duty to take action and contribute his intellect so he could make a positive impact for the German churches. At this stage in his life, faith in action meant, and even required, Bonhoeffer to step in and help defend and preserve Christian doctrine in Germany.

Fascism and Resistance

It is important to remember the appeal that Nazism had to many conservative German citizens during the Interwar period. In the midst of the German economic depression, the people felt the more liberal, Weimar Republic and the Treaty of Versailles, was taking advantage of their military defeat and destroying Germany as a nation-state. These feelings festered, and like Italy and the Soviet Union, the people turned to a totalitarian who promised a return to dominance for their nation.²⁶

On January 1st, 1933, Hitler was democratically *elected* to power in Germany and had used political alliances with conservative groups to gain momentum. In his campaigning, Hitler used the anger of the German public to scapegoat Jews, Liberal Democrats, and Communists as the cause for Germany's defeat in World War I and the nation's economic crisis. With promises of industrial revival and imperial agenda, Hitler

²⁶ Smith, Kevin. "The History of World War II, 1918-1945." (Lecture Notes, Ball State University, 2015), np.

stirred the nationalist spirit of the German people, who felt that their nation's salvation from economic and political dysfunction had arrived.²⁷

During his rise to power, and after his election, Hitler frequently relied on Joseph Goebbels to help him communicate Nazi propaganda across Germany and also censor any opposition to Nazi ideology.²⁸ The takeover was incredibly swift and efficient. In fact, on January 4th, just three days after Hitler was elected, Bonhoeffer was delivering a speech titled, "The Younger Generation's Altered Concept of Leadership," which argued that it was a mistake for Germans to elect a Fascist totalitarian. The transmission was cut in the middle of the speech.²⁹ Bonhoeffer later printed the speech and circulate it throughout Germany, but the effects of censorship had already begun to silence voices that were against Hitler.³⁰

In order to keep power in Germany, Hitler knew that he needed to try and control the political and social ideas that were in opposition to him, and he saw the churches as one way to help him in that effort. From a religious standpoint, Germany had a rich cultural heritage in Christianity. In 1933, "almost all Germans were Christian, belonging either to the Roman Catholic (ca. 20 million members) or the Protestant (ca. 40 million members) churches. The Jewish community in Germany represented less than 1% of the total population."³¹ Hitler's plan of attack was to manipulate the Protestant church doctrine in favor of a Fascist message, force the Roman Catholic churches to ally with

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ David Clay Large, *Contending With Hitler*, New York: Goethe House, 1988.

²⁹ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 56.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

³¹ "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum," *Ushmm.org*,
<http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-features/special-focus/dietrich-bonhoeffer>.

him by threatening their autonomy and presence in Germany, and to make Jews a scapegoat and ultimately exterminate them.

Changing the Christian messages in Germany, allowed Hitler to theoretically be able to have 60 million additional Germans come to his support. In some of his private reflections, Hitler revealed his true feelings for Christianity and even indicates what he desired to manipulate the doctrine to:

“It’s been our misfortune to have the wrong religion. Why didn’t we have the religion of the Japanese, who regard sacrifice for the Fatherland as the highest good? [Islam] too would have been much more compatible to us than Christianity. Why did it have to be Christianity with its meekness and flabbiness?”³²

Hitler had many other problems with Christianity because of its Judaic roots, so he had to find a way to substitute the historical and theological heritage of Christianity with National Socialist dogma. The Nazis were able to achieve multiple aspects of this agenda through ideological osmosis: “In the Nazi’s conceptual universe, the struggle against Marxist liberalism was similarly bound up in anti-Semitism. Those who revered Jesus as the first anti-Semite (for preaching “against” the Pharisees and teachers of the Jewish law) often cast him as the first socialist as well.”³³ Therefore, the Nazis were able to combat their opposition by preaching their ideology in the churches. This was a spillover effect from their larger efforts to control media in Germany.

One might ask, how did a practicing Christian end up believing the Nazi doctrine? The Nazi interpretations of the Bible, posing Jesus as having any political allegiance to the parties in Germany of that day, were extreme and clearly are not

³² Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 55.

³³ Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 44.

backed by the evidence found in Scripture. Nonetheless, there were people within the German churches that sided with Hitler and spread this Nazi doctrine:

*"Historically the German Evangelical Church viewed itself as one of the pillars of German culture and society, with a theologically grounded tradition of loyalty to the state. During the 1920s, a movement emerged within the German Evangelical Church called the Deutsche Christen, or "German Christians." The "German Christians" embraced many of the nationalistic and racial aspects of Nazi ideology. Once the Nazis came to power, this group sought the creation of a national "Reich Church" and supported a "Nazified" version of Christianity."*³⁴

The people within the German Evangelical Church, with the combined effort from Nazi propaganda, began to transform and persuade the ideas of Christianity in Germany away from its Biblically based doctrine to a politically biased doctrine. Many Germans were more concerned with their nation's status and its economics problems than they were with the message that supposedly was helping them.

In addition, the Nazis also passed formal legislation that restricted the religious freedom of Christians and Jews in Germany. The legislation came in two forms, the Enabling Act and the Aryan Paragraph. The legislation was passed to restrict Jews from having political and civil rights in the society, but Christians simultaneously felt the effects of these new laws.³⁵ These laws equate to the 1st Amendment to the United States Constitution being suspended, restricting Germans from freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, etc. For Bonhoeffer, the effects not only were witnessed through his position as a minister, but his family was impacted by this legislation as well: his brother-in-law, Gerhard Leibholz, was Jewish. "Through Sabine and her future family, the Bonhoeffers would experience the difficulties of the years ahead in an especially personal way."

³⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Ushmm.org,
<http://www.ushmm.org/information/exhibitions/online-features/special-focus/dietrich-bonhoeffer>.

³⁵ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 62.

To counter the Nazi agenda, Bonhoeffer aided a number of movements within Germany that attempted to preserve and protect the integrity of Christian churches. One of these was called the Ecumenical Movement, which was a group of international clergy that frequently met to discuss the internal and external problems they faced as Christian leaders in Europe. Through those councils, Bonhoeffer discussed how to prevent the Nazification of the churches, preserve the freedom of religion, and to help Jews who were persecuted by the Reich. Bonhoeffer also developed an important network of clergy that aided his resistance once the Second World War began.

Another major way Bonhoeffer resisted the Nazis was through the Confessing Church. After reuniting with Karl Barth, Dietrich helped create an underground church in Germany that was supported by clergy from across the world. The Confessing Church can be seen as Dietrich's next step to reconciling his resistance against the Nazis with his Biblical and pacifist beliefs. One Biblical passage that stood out to him the most was Romans 13, which states:

*"Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist that have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience."*³⁶

Bonhoeffer later gave a sermon on the passage in March of 1933. In it, he gave three possible interpretations for how the German churches could respond to Nazi authority:

³⁶ *The Holy Bible, New International Version Study Bible*, Romans 13:1-5.

1. "Question the state regarding its actions and their legitimacy—to help the state be the state as God ordained.
2. To aid the victims of state action— he made a bold leap here.
3. Not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to put a spoke in the wheel itself.' This, he said, is permitted only when the church sees its very existence threatened by the state, and when the state ceases to be the state as defined by God."³⁷

It is crucial to understand the context from which the apostle Paul wrote Romans 13 and identified the parallels that Dietrich Bonhoeffer was enduring in Germany during the Interwar period and later during World War II. Paul wrote to the Roman church, which consisted of Jewish and Gentile members, while they were being hunted by Nero and internally questioning the validity, reliability, and ultimately the truth of the Gospels. The letter serves as one of Paul's apologies to the Romans, defending the Christian faith, and also addressing how the church members should behave in society given the threats to their lives.

When Bonhoeffer helped begin the Confessing Church, he faced similar problems the Roman church members did. His three interpretations reveal that Bonhoeffer not only was trying to follow pacifism, but also was defending his response to Nazism. It is clear that Bonhoeffer also believed these interpretations to be a progression, which is evident in his actions. At the first stage of resistance, Bonhoeffer questioned the state's legitimacy in the censored speeches and writing he circulated throughout Germany. In the second stage, he attempted to aid his brother-in-law, as well as several other Jews, in order to protect them from the anti-Semitic state. Finally, Bonhoeffer implemented the third interpretation and made several attempts to weaken and eventually kill the head of state.

³⁷ Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer*, 62.

The resistance against Hitler continued at Finkenwalde, Poland, where Bonhoeffer lead a seminary, which met illegally. Because of the manipulation of censorship implemented by the state, religious education at seminaries was undermined and replaced with Nazi doctrine. Bonhoeffer made the effort to educate young pastors in order to preserve the Christian message in the midst of Nazi censorship. Finkenwalde operated from 1935 to 1937, producing pastors and theologians that were free of the Nazi dogma for the Confessing Church. During this time, Bonhoeffer also produced many of the classics on theology for which he is known.

As Bonhoeffer made efforts to preserve the German churches and fight the Nazi regime, other high-ranking Nazi officials played a large role in the persecution of Protestant churches and tried to manipulate church attendance even further. Pierre Ayoçoberry puts it this way:

"The party radicals, Ley, Rosenberg, Schirach, and the SS, for once in agreement, took the Movement of Faith (a Fascist movement in German Christianity) under their protection and encouraged the members of their respective organizations to state an official 'walk-out from the Church' and simply become 'believers in God,' in other words to proclaim themselves agnostics. In all, this category seems to have included 2.5 million people in 1939, to whom should be added the 1.2 million who chose to be classified more discreetly as 'with no faith' ...it seems reasonable to conclude that most were practicing Protestants..."³⁸

These party officials, used these walk outs to create the Movement of Faith, in order to establish a Reich Church. Hitler and the Nazis, as mentioned before, were trying to substitute Christian theology with party doctrine, and their efforts were gaining success at the expense of the German Protestant churches.

³⁸ Pierre Ayoçoberry, "The Social History of the Third Reich, 1933-1945," Translated by Janet Lloyd, New York: The New Press, 1999, 191.

After the war broke out in 1939, Bonhoeffer took his resistance to the next level. With each passing day, the Nazi state became less of a state "as defined by God" in Bonhoeffer's mind. His other brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, recruited Bonhoeffer to work for the Abwehr, the German counter-intelligence department:

*"Bonhoeffer had joined the Abwehr in October 1940. Ostensibly, he was to help the German war effort by using his wide range of church contacts throughout Europe as sources of intelligence. In fact, Bonhoeffer was a clandestine operative for the resistance. He was a courier for Hans Oster and Hans von Dohnanyi (his brother in law), the key conspirators in the Abwehr. Bonhoeffer had become convinced that that a coup was Germany's, and the world's, best hope."*³⁹

Bonhoeffer served as a double agent for the British and began to use his connections through the Ecumenical Movement to aid the Allies in their war effort. Bonhoeffer had established a close relationship with Dr. George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester through the Ecumenical Movement, and used that relationship to communicate German intelligence to the British.⁴⁰ Bonhoeffer made frequent visits to England to exchange information, until Churchill closed the borders.⁴¹ Once he could no longer get into England, Bonhoeffer used his contacts through the Confessing Church to continue to exchange information. In May 1942, Bonhoeffer used forged papers, that the Abwehr provided him with, and travelled to Stockholm where he met with Bishop Bell about the Valkyrie assassination plot. The Valkyrie conspirators attempted to rally support from the Allies, but their requests were not met with a positive response.⁴² Both the British

³⁹ Robert Whalen., *Assassinating Hitler: Ethics and Resistance in Nazi Germany*, Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 124.

⁴⁰ J.S. Conway, *The Nazi Persecution of the Churches, 1933-1945*, New York: Basic Books, 1968, 83.

⁴¹ Klemperer, Klemens von. *German Resistance Against Hitler: The Search for Allies Abroad, 1938-1945*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

⁴² Bullock, Alan, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, New York: Harper and Row, 1962, 736.

and the Americans were skeptical of any type of German resistance because they had demanded an unconditional surrender from Germany.

As the military victories for Germany declined, some high-ranking German officers and officials believed that Hitler was going to lead Germany to an even greater downfall than that suffered during World War I:

*"I had not become an officer to shoot the head of state like a dog. Desiring the end of the regime and the death of its leader was, in the eyes of our compatriots, not only a state offense but also a stab in the back of the people as a whole, united in fighting a merciless war. The decision to join the resistance could result only from a long deliberation, which was certainly made easier by the events, scenes, and situations I had observed or experienced. Without generalizing from my own case, there were few examples in Germany, at least among military men, of a spontaneous and impulsive commitment to the struggle against the regime. In my case, it was a combination of different experiences that led to the decision to rebel, to the point that this idea, at first difficult to accept, by 1942 seemed obvious and even obligatory. I was also lucky enough to meet people who were further along in the process, and who embodied my commitment. The education that Georg and I received was certainly not alien to the evolution of our views, which advanced in tandem even though we had been separated in 1941-42, and our communications on this subject were necessarily fleeting."*⁴³

Von Boeselager reveals, in great detail, the internal juxtaposition between loyalty to military principles and civil responsibilities. Bonhoeffer went through similar, difficult experiences from 1933 to 1940 that caused him to grapple between his convictions for his faith and his beliefs in pacifism. However, Bonhoeffer added significantly more weight to his decisions because he consistently attempted to follow Christian morals and ethics. Adding a moral dimension and the possibility of judgment certainly added more weight to the decisions Bonhoeffer made.

The feelings of these high ranking Germans were not just present because of the growing number of military defeats but because who the Germans were being defeated

⁴³ Philipp Freiherr von Boeselager, "Valkyrie," Translated by Steven Rendall, New York, Adolf A. Knopf, 2009, 60-61.

by. Three of the four Allies were democratic states that judiciously handled surrenders relative to the Soviets. Because of Hitler's strong anti-Communism, and his blatant orders to exterminate Communists, and Russian life in general, the Germans were not given any quarter because of their actions on the Eastern Front. From a pragmatic standpoint, Hitler was also making terrible blunders militarily by taking control of the military strategy.⁴⁴

From a different point of view, Bonhoeffer saw Hitler as unfit to lead because of his malicious actions against Jews, Christians, and the church's doctrine. While working for the Abwehr, it is possible that Bonhoeffer also learned of Hitler's Final Solution to the Jewish question, which would have motivated him to remove him from power even more. Bonhoeffer now had the opportunity to act out the third interpretation of his sermon by participating in Operation Valkyrie, which was the assassination attempt on Hitler's life on July 20th, 1944. Though Bonhoeffer did not physically make or plant the bomb, his meetings with the British, and his travels to Stockholm, as a courier of information were enough to categorize him as a conspirator.

Conclusion

After the failed assassination attempt, investigating agents discovered information that revealed Hans von Dohnanyi and Dietrich Bonhoeffer's affiliation with the July 20 plot on Hitler's life. Bonhoeffer subsequently was arrested and sent to Flossenbürg concentration camp in 1944.⁴⁵ He died just 10 days before American

⁴⁴ Smith, Kevin. "The History of World War II, 1918-1945." (Lecture Notes, Ball State University, 2015), np.

⁴⁵ Bullock, *Hitler*, 738.

infantry liberated the camp and linked together with Soviet forces. Bonhoeffer was executed by SS judge Otto Thornbeck and hung to death on April 9th, 1945.

The decision processes that went through Dietrich's mind cannot be truly fathomed, but the development of his thoughts and intellect from his early life up until his death that can be pieced together historically is truly remarkable. While it is important for historians to be careful to avoid hagiography, there is still a high level of respect and admiration for Bonhoeffer because his life is an extreme example of the difficulty that all humans face in decision-making. When a decision presents itself that seems to have no good choices or possible outcomes, what is one to do? Dietrich Bonhoeffer experienced some of the most painstaking decisions any person might have to face, and yet in all his decisions he attempted to remain faithful to the spiritual convictions he believed in and fought so hard to defend them from oppression. 2nd Corinthians 4:8-12 are just a few verses that characterize Bonhoeffer's pious, collected demeanor:

*"We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you."*⁴⁶

Bonhoeffer did not consider himself blameless, though. From his homeschooling and up to his death he was convicted that faith in action was the only true faith one could have: "Silence in the face of evil is itself evil: God will not hold anyone guiltless. Not to peak is to speak. Not to act is to act."⁴⁷ If Bonhoeffer were alive today, he would join

⁴⁶ *The Holy Bible, New International Version Study Bible*, 2 Corinthians 4:8-12.

⁴⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

historians and point out where he could have done more to help Jews, churches, and Germans that were being oppressed by the Nazis, because there were points where Bonhoeffer failed.

Victoria J. Barnett summarized this point well at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Bonhoeffer's death:

*"If we can understand Bonhoeffer outside the box—not as saint, not as mythological hero, but as someone who reflected poignantly on evil's consequences for the human conscience and spirit, for an entire culture and country, we may begin to uncover the person behind the mythology: a man who tried to face the darkness of his times. In the process, we may discover someone who can speak more directly to the darkness and failures of our own."*⁴⁸

As historians attempt to understand the meaning of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life, the historical facts reveal a unique relationship between continuity and change in his beliefs. From his childhood education, to his collegiate experiences at Berlin and in America, Bonhoeffer witnessed the importance of churches and the value of the Christian message they preached. His convictions for the various institutions of corporate worship led him to stand for the preservation of Christian doctrine in the face of Nazi persecution and attempted manipulation. As Ruth Zerner points out:

*"Rather, like all of us, he was to some extent a victim of his background and perspectives. Men's thoughts and actions are inevitably bound up with each other, as well as with the political, social, and cultural matrix in which they develop. The historian must correlate these varied elements in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's relationship to Jewish people and their experiences, past and contemporary."*⁴⁹

Ultimately, Bonhoeffer's reliance on the teachings from his early life and his theological education led him to resist and aid the Valkyrie conspirators. Yet this decision was not

⁴⁸ Victoria J. Barnett, "Bonhoeffer is widely beloved. But to fully understand him we should first dial back the hero worship," *The Washington Post*, 9 April 2015.

⁴⁹ Ruth Zerner, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Jews: Thoughts and Actions, 1933-1945," pg. 236-237

made without intense thought and reason. It took the provision of all these experiences for Bonhoeffer to have the mental framework he needed to justify his actions with the pacifist, Christian beliefs that he so strongly believed in.

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